

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE BROTHERS

ASSOCIATED WITH THE GOD OF LIFE

Our life of prayer

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Superior General
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December 25th, 2002
The Nativity of the Lord

Dear Brothers,

“I thank God whenever I think of you; and, every time I pray for you all, I always pray with joy...Tell God all your desires of every kind in prayer and petition shot through with gratitude, and the peace of God which is beyond our understanding will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:3-4; 4:6-7).

During this Christmas season, which awakens in us the desire to share the best of ourselves with the persons we love, as the Father did when he sent his Son into the world, I cannot find a better gift to share with you, my Brothers, than the *peace of God which is beyond our understanding*.

But peace, according to Saint Paul and as we can see in the first part of this text, is a consequence and a fruit of a life centered in God by means of constant prayers of supplication, thanksgiving, and petition

which allow our hearts and minds to find their fullness in the Lord Jesus. There is no doubt, therefore, that we are associated with the God of life, the God who in Jesus Christ came to give us life and, as the Founder was fond of recalling (M 45.1; 112.3; 196.3; 201.3), life in abundance (Jn 10:10). This will be the topic of this Pastoral Letter.

I. A Few Introductory Remarks about the Year That Is Ending

The end of a year is a good time to look forward, a time of real “kairos.” Surely we should look upon the past with gratitude for God's actions in our own lives and in the life of the Institute. In this sense, I want to share with you now some of the experiences of this year that have most influenced me on a personal level; and I invite you, above all, to look to the future with trust. Karl Rahner said it well, when in speaking about Advent, he said: *“All too frequently and flippantly we immerse ourselves in what we call the present...But, if we do not look toward the future, in all honesty we do not know what the meaning nor the object of the present task is. Advent calls us to look to the future and plan something for the day after tomorrow, with the full conviction that, if our project for the immediate future should perhaps fail, we have nevertheless survived that immediate future with courage. We have faced shortsighted resignation and have demonstrated that we have faith in the eternal future of God.”*

The pastoral visit to Africa

Over the course of three months and in three different stages, General Councilor Brother Yemanu and I visited, with the exception of Madagascar due to its political situation at the time, all of the Districts, Sub-Districts, and Delegations in the Region of RELAF. In twelve countries, Brothers and Partners do an enormous amount of good in favor of children and the young. Africa makes us aware that we are an international, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural Institute. These differences enrich our charism, which cannot be read from the perspective of one culture alone.

Africa represents for us a great hope. Along with Latin America, it is a Region that has the most young Brothers and candidates in formation. Naturally, there are many challenges that come from the fact that Africa is undergoing a phase of growth and consolidation. I want to thank the Brothers from other countries who, through their missionary spirit and generous dedication, have made possible the growth that we experience today in Africa. I do not care for the use of the term “*expatriate*,” which is often how you are described, because it points out what you left behind. I would much prefer if we could find a term for you that would express what you have found and what has marked your lives profoundly.

I want to say to the African Brothers, what is said in the

Rule, that *you should feel that you are the ones principally in charge of inculturation in [your] own social milieu* (Rule, 18b). It seems to me that we should make the greatest effort in ensuring adequate vocational discernment, in giving effective priority to initial formation and to the formation of native formation personnel, and in responding creatively to the vast poverty on the African continent by means of our charism of Christian education. I hope that the situation in the Ivory Coast, which has affected our Brothers in the community in Daloa City, is resolved soon and that it affects neither our Scholasticate communities nor CELAF (Lasallian University Center of Africa).

Meetings with young Lasallians

I had the good fortune this year to meet twice with international Lasallian youth groups. Last December in Sydney, Australia, I participated in the Sixth Young Lasallians Meeting, organized by the PARC Region. There were 180 young participants who came from countries of diverse cultures and religions: Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Singapore, Australia, Papua New Guinea, and New Zealand. Two things especially struck me at this meeting. First, I was struck by the manner in which young people from so many different countries, cultures, and even religions identified themselves as Lasallians. Within the Lasallian values of faith, community, and service, they find meaning for their

lives. Second, I was especially struck toward the end of the meeting by the desire on the part of all to do something for others. The question most often heard was: “*What can we do?*”

I had a similar experience more recently in Quebec, Canada, during the International Symposium for Young Lasallians. This meeting was held from 12 to 17 July and had a twofold purpose. On the one hand, it was to explore the possibility of creating an International Movement of Young Lasallians; and, on the other hand, it was to share experiences of faith, community, and service as lived out in the various Regions of the Institute. Some 145 young people and their collaborators from more than 20 countries participated. The experience of community, as well as the desire to do something significant for the poor and needy, was again clear.

Under the coordination of Vicar General Brother William Mann steps are currently being taken to establish an International Council of Young Lasallians. I would also like to add here the very positive impact on me of some young North American Lasallian Volunteers, whom I got to know personally, on my recent visit to New York City. I have a deep admiration for them and for what they do, especially within the Lasallian Association of Miguel Schools.

Personally, I am convinced that young people repre-

sent today a great strength for the Institute; and, if we want to ensure the future of our charism, we must have the ability to attract them to our vocation or to become part of our association in its different expressions.

An anniversary to remember

This year on 13 February we recalled the 20th anniversary of the martyrdom of Brother James Miller. Having known him during the time he worked and died in Guatemala, his memory has a very special meaning for me. Brother James, like other martyrs of the Institute, reminds us that the children and young people that God has confided to our care should touch our souls so profoundly that we would be ready, as the Founder tells us, to give our lives for them.

In one of his last letters to a family friend, in which he expressed his wishes for the new year 1982, Brother James said: *“God only knows why he continues to call me to Guatemala when some friends and relatives are encouraging me to leave this work in the interest of my own comfort and safety. I have been a De La Salle Brother for nearly 20 years, and my commitment to my vocation has been strengthened through working in Central America. I ask God for his grace and his strength to serve him faithfully by my presence among the poor and oppressed of Guatemala. I trust in his providence, and I place my life in his hands.”* May these words encourage our

own dedication, and especially that of those Brothers who are experiencing difficult political situations.

Gabriel Drolin and our presence in Italy

Another important anniversary of this past year was the tercentenary of the arrival of Brother Gabriel Drolin in Rome. The Brothers and the Lasallian Family in Italy have celebrated the commemoration of the occasion in an excellent manner. Perhaps the most significant anniversary event was the meeting of the Italian Lasallian Family with Pope John Paul II on the actual day of his birthday. The “Paul VI Hall” was the location for this unforgettable meeting, which was attended by over 7,000 persons.

In his address, the Pope said to us: *“The twenty-six years spent in Rome by Brother Gabriel, as the only representative of the Institute, demonstrate a lesson in his total fidelity to his religious and educational vocation. Those years are an example of a deep religious spirit and a healthy realism in facing the unexpected difficulties in everyday life. Therefore, Brother Gabriel is a model that we should look upon today with admiration because fidelity to the Lasallian charism and mission always demands dauntless courage to face every trial. The Lasallian educational works continue to be a providential resource for the good of youth, the Church, and society as a whole. Therefore, fidelity to the charism needs new inspira-*

tion and creativity more than ever in order to respond appropriately to the needs of today's world."

Educational innovations

Affirming that Lasallian educational works continue to be a providential resource, the Pope invites us to live our charism with "new inspiration and creativity." This is precisely the topic of the "*educational campaign*" for this year as it is proposed on page 29 of Circular 448: *Toward the Year 2007*.

We know very well that educational systems often tend more toward "tradition" than toward "being innovative." We ought, because what's really at stake today is the future of humankind and its survival, to overcome this tendency by placing a greater emphasis on our ability to invent, create, and innovate. It is important not to be content with the innate tendency to reproduce structures. Rather, we should seek ways to modify structures and improve them in such a way that they will ensure a more just world, a more participatory society, and a more radical living out of Christian values.

Throughout our Lasallian history the needs of the young have always awakened creative Lasallian responses. Therefore, the first condition for being innovative is to know and to love the reality in which we live - with its lights and shadows, its pluses and

minuses. This contact with reality should then lead us to pass on a kind of knowledge which is not satisfied with content alone, but which gives priority to the ability to search for meaning. We are aware that it is more important to help young people find meaning in their lives than only to fill their heads with ideas. It is more important to have the ability to continue learning than it is only to know a lot of information. Finally, we should have the creativity to see to it that our students commit themselves to building a better world based on a deep spirit of solidarity.

Lasallian education, consequently, should be attentive to situations that we experience today. As such, it must be responsive: to the defense of the “rights of children,” which is intended to be a characteristic of the Lasallian Family as a whole; to the phenomenon of globalization which makes us very aware of those who are excluded and to the new types of poverty; to the spreading of the faith, which needs to be based on a solid Christian understanding of the person; and to an inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue, which of its nature is marked by respect and tolerance.

The pastoral ministry of vocations

During the first week of November, I had the opportunity to participate in a vocation ministry meeting organized by the ARLEP Region in Madrid. This meeting was a preparation for the vocation workshop

that will be held on a European level in November 2003. This meeting reminded me of Proposition 26 of our 43rd General Chapter: *That, in the course of 2003, each Region of the Institute, singly or in cooperation with others, plan and hold a Lasallian workshop on the pastoral ministry of vocations....*

I believe that we are all aware that the topic of vocations is vital for us. I believe, however, that the main issue in the promotion of our vocation is not one of survival or of not dying out. The fundamental issue is that we respond faithfully to the growing needs and calls of the poor and the young. They are our reason for existing. I am confident that all Regions of the Institute will take very seriously the preparation and carrying out of these important vocation workshops. We know, for example, that the three Regions of RELAL, USA/Toronto, and French-speaking Canada are already preparing a joint workshop on this topic.

The European Congress on Vocations held in 1997 took up Pope John Paul's invitation to make a qualitative leap in vocation ministry. He told us: *"It is finally time to pass from the 'pathology of exhaustion' and resignation, which justifies the vocation crisis by attributing it to the current generation of youth as its sole cause, to the courage to ask the appropriate questions and to see possible mistakes and faults for the purpose of achieving a new, ardent creative impetus of witness"* (*New Vocations for a New Europe*, 13).

With the intention of contributing to the preparations for and discussions about this topic, I will, in the next few months, make available this text of the Pope on which I based my remarks at the vocation meeting of the ARLEP Region.

A statement of the General Council

At the beginning of our third year of service, we Brothers in the General Council had an exchange during the month of September about the ministry of leadership that we have carried out; and we prepared a statement that has now begun to be shared on an Institute level. This sharing will continue in the coming months. This statement, when viewed against the backdrop of the invitation of God to Israel, is an act of faith in life. *“Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live”* (Dt 30:19).

We affirm once more, as a General Council, our strong conviction with regard to the relevance of the Lasallian Mission. We believe in the need for and the importance of giving a human and Christian education in today's world and of encouraging innovative initiatives in favor of youth-at-risk and the urgent needs of the poor.

We affirm, once more, our strong conviction that today's world needs communities of Brothers, Lasallian educational communities, communities of

Associates, and communities of Brothers and Associates living together who offer signs of joyous communion and sacred spaces for welcome and availability. We hope that these convictions might be shared, first of all, by you, Brothers, and also by all those who participate in the Lasallian charism. We must be aware that it is by using together the strength, faith, and vitality of each one that we will be able to fulfill the mission that God has entrusted to us.

II. ASSOCIATED WITH THE GOD OF LIFE

Our Prayer Today

The prayer life of the Brother today

Our vocation as Brothers associates us with the God of life, made manifest in Jesus Christ, to continue his saving work. Our prayer should be rooted in this idea. As the Founder tells us: *“You carry out a work that requires you to touch hearts, but this you cannot do except by the Spirit of God. Pray to him to give you today the same grace he gave the holy apostles; and ask him that, after filling you with his Holy Spirit to sanctify yourselves, he also communicate himself to you in order to procure the salvation of others”* (M 43.3).

From 17 to 22 June of this year, the Jesuits held a session on liturgical renewal in our Generalate. At the end of the session, the participants asked Father Kolvenbach to write a letter about liturgy in which he would emphasize the need to give better training in this area to young Jesuits. The Superior General of the Jesuits, with his great sense of humor, responded to the request and indicated his surprise by saying: *“I am pleased to see that there still are Jesuits who believe in the efficacy of a letter from the General”* (cf. *National Catholic Reporter*, 5 July 2002, p. 7). I

write this letter to you with that same hope, Brothers. I write with the certitude that we are all convinced of the importance of prayer in our lives and that we all desire that our prayer be life giving.

1. *Our world and prayer*

No one doubts that we are living in a world that is changing. I will not try to describe here the changes that we are experiencing and those in which we are either protagonists or victims. I will simply focus on some characteristics of our reality today because it seems to me that when we speak about prayer we should start from the *signs of the times*, which are always ambiguous but which also manifest to us the unfathomable ways of God.

We live today in a world that fascinates us not so much by the great stories presented to us but by the stimuli that are offered to us daily. We are all familiar with the seemingly unlimited possibilities of visual and auditory stimuli offered by modern technology. We do not forget that when God became flesh in Jesus, the greatest expression of his presence was communicated to us by the senses. “*What we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have watched and touched with our own hands... we declare to you...*” (1 Jn 1:1-2).

Contemplation, for its part, permits us, on the one hand, to distance ourselves from these stimuli and to

give them their true value. On the other hand, contemplation permits us to enter into them to discover the mysterious presence of God by means, as the Founder repeatedly invited us to do, of the eyes of faith. In addition, we can see in our present reality a call to rediscover the narrative language of a faith that came into being through salvific events. Given the excesses of discursive language that has sometimes characterized our prayer, might this not be a call to a contemplative awareness based on life, a contemplative awareness questioned by the senses and by which God is discovered in daily living?

We live in a world in which life has accelerated and where efficiency is the priority. We can communicate almost instantaneously with the entire world, relationships multiply, the pace of work is frenzied, meals are taken quickly, commitments are many, stock market changes occur in seconds, travel from one continent to another is a matter of hours, inventions and styles come one after another. This all helps us to solve many problems, of course; but it, also, can lead us to forget what is important while responding to what is urgent. Prayer is a call to be attentive. It helps us tune into God's time, which is time for what is essential: for love, for listening, for quiet, for personal relationships, for spiritual depth, for a sense of gratuity.

As the Jesuit Benjamín González Buelta tells us: *“The value of efficacy as a basic dimension can transfer to*

other dimensions of life, including the apostolic dimension. It can deprive us of the dimension of gratuity, which, without denying the need to look for efficacy in our work, can rob us of something that goes beyond and touches more profound depths of the human being. Love, friendship, sacrifice for other persons without counting the cost are crucial for a relationship with God and with others. No truly human life exists without a sense of gratuity.” (“To Pray Today” in Diakonía, January-March 2002, pp. 52-53).

We live today in a globalized world, a world without borders that is open to cultural interchange and inter-religious dialogue. It is a world in which people are closer and in which there is more tolerance. Yet, paradoxically, it is also one in which wars are on the increase, the fight against terrorism is the primary objective, and migration policies are getting tougher. It is worth asking ourselves what all of this may mean for our prayer life. I believe that it is an invitation to broaden horizons and to be inclusive, to contemplate the differences that enrich and complement us, to sensitize ourselves to a God who, as the Founder reminds us, desires that all be saved.

We live in a world that favors individualism and intimacy. According to various authors, we are, on the one hand, going from “*homo faber*” to “*homo ludens*,” from Prometheus to Narcissus, from the “man of business” to the “man of pleasure” for whom what is im-

portant is not to work but to enjoy life. It is enough to look at certain modern psychologies to discover that it is the “self” that is viewed as central. Freud spoke to us about the satisfaction of desires, and Maslow spoke of self-realization through the satisfaction of primary needs. Adler spoke of affirming one's own role and superiority in confronting others.

There is no doubt that one of the greatest things in today's world is the importance given to the personal the “self.” However, we know that this value is relative because, according to the Gospel, “*anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life will find it*” (Mt 16:25). The ongoing challenge is to move ourselves out of the center in order to be centered in God and in his plan of salvation for all humankind. We know that this is, paradoxically, the road to real fulfillment. A thought of the Founder in this regard, found in a letter written a few months before his death, has always struck me. “To my mind, what I must ask of God in prayer is that he tell me what he wants me to do and inspire me with the disposition he wants me to have (Letter 127).

At the same time, this search for of the “self” which characterizes our world can help us recall the principal role that prayer should have for a person. It provides us with the experience of coming face to face with God in our unique, inner being. Our Lasallian tradition has rightly given great importance to the community as-

pect of prayer; but this should not make us forget that prayer has a personal dimension that, it seems to me, we have not always developed sufficiently. The 42nd General Chapter expressed it very well: *“We believe that our relationship with the God of Jesus Christ cannot be programmed, that our histories and spiritual journeys are varied, and that our conversation and spiritual progress depend on the mystery between God and each one of us”* (Circular 435, p. 52).

2. Prayer in the Institute's recent past

We have a long tradition in the Institute with regard to our life of prayer. The stories of the holiness of so many of our Brothers and the invitations made over more than three-hundred years by General Chapters, Circulars, Pastoral Letters, and special events make this clear. I would like to take a brief look at our experience in this area, beginning with the General Chapter of 1966-1967. In 1971 Brother Charles Henry Buttimer sent, at the request of the intercapitular meeting of Visitors, a Circular on Our Life of Prayer to each Brother. The Circular dealt with an interpretation of and a commentary on Chapter 10 of the Rule. In his introduction, Brother Charles says: *“Following the example of the Holy Founder, we should always consider prayer as life. In our case, it is the life of a Brother of the Christian Schools, which derives its specific characteristic from the fact that in every detail of his existence, he wishes to fulfill the motto, 'Live, Jesus, in my heart!'”*

This Jesus is the One who, through the Brother, desires to bring the message of freedom to the youth of today. But life must receive appropriate nourishment; life seeks to communicate itself to others; it must grow, find ways to express itself; and this is true both for the community and for the individual” (Circular 395, p. 5).

In the 1979 Circular on our Community Life, Brother José Pablo Basterrechea and his Council devoted an entire chapter to the prayer life of the Brother. Like other Circulars of this decade, it was a commentary on the propositions approved by the 40th General Chapter. In the section devoted to prayer, an invitation was made to live coherently our vocation as a Brother. It stated: *“We usually do not suddenly decide to pray as a result of a persuasive homily. Rather, we come to prayer more spontaneously, gradually turning to God, seeing Him in the young people with whom we work, in our Brothers, in the world around us. We turn outwardly; and, like the disciples of Emmaus, we follow Christ in faith”* (Circular 410, p. 68). And in his 1984 Pastoral Letter, Brother José Pablo invited us to take God seriously: *“In one's personal plans, as in the 'community annual program,' it is not always clear that God is the center around which our lives are built, that the work in which we are engaged is really God's work, and that on him depend the success and the true meaning of everything we undertake”* (p. 13).

Brother John Johnston devoted his 1990 Pastoral

Letter to the topic of Identity and Prayer as inseparable elements in the life of the Brother. In the second section of this Letter, he defined the Brother as a man of prayer. Prayer should be a period of “*heightened awareness in faith of the loving presence of the Lord and of our presence to Him*” (pp. 22-23). However, Brother John shows us, at the same time, how the Founder's teaching on prayer insists on its link with life: “*De La Salle urged the Brothers to see the relationship between their prayer life and their daily service to youth. They should bring their experiences to the Lord. He tells them to intercede for those 'confided to your care'*” (p. 29).

It seems to me that the message of our last three Superior Generals is very clear. Our prayer is always considered within the perspective of our life and our reality. It is to be considered as an element of integration of the three dimensions that constitute us as Brothers: our consecration to God, our apostolic mission, and our community life.

Three events that occurred in these last decades seem to me to be very significant with regard to our life of prayer. I am referring to the Symposium on Prayer on the occasion in 1980 of the Tercentenary of the Institute, to the Year of Prayer that responded in 1995 to a proposition from the 42nd General Chapter, and to the publication in 1989 of *Cahiers Lasalliens* 50. I was fortunate to participate actively in the first two,

first as a member of the Symposium and later as a member of the General Council in drawing up some support materials for the Year of Prayer.

The Symposium was, for me, an unforgettable experience. It helped me discover better the richness of our Lasallian prayer when seen from the point of view of distinct cultures and sensitivities. The “Creed” which we drew up at the end of the Symposium, it seems to me, summarizes very well the richness that was discovered. This Creed was a statement of our belief in prayer as both a gift and an art. We saw prayer as an invitation to re-examine the quality of the presence of God and of the people whom we serve in our lives. It was a call to share our prayer based on our own poverty and to recognize prayer as a personal existential imperative without forgetting its community dimension. It was viewed as a means to light up our life with the Word of God and to discover that our ministry leads us to a direct and an ongoing relationship with that God for whom we work and who gives meaning to our apostolic activity.

The 42nd General Chapter proposed that the year 1995 be devoted specifically to the Brother's prayer life, and the General Council prepared rich materials to be used over the course of that year. In the introduction to these materials, the following was stated; and I think it sums up the purpose we were seeking: *“To speak of prayer is to discover that when the Spirit says within me, 'Father', it makes me a valued and*

loved son. Prayer means to believe in myself. It is to discover that I cannot say 'Father,' if I am not fraternal and in solidarity. To pray is to have the ability for giving and for abandonment. It is to empower my being as a Brother. But, honestly, we know that it is not always that way. We are not always present to God. We often experience the tension between our work and prayer, between certain negative values that the world presents to us and our faith structures. Prayer is not always a deeply motivating principle for us; and, at times, we do not find the necessary community support in our search for the Lord.” Seven years later, it seems to me that this text is still valid for us

Finally, I would like to conclude this brief historical overview by recalling the new edition of the Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer, with notes and commentary by Brother Michel Sauvage and Brother Miguel Campos. Published in the French language in 1989 as Cahiers lasalliens 50, it was subsequently translated into both English and Spanish. This book continues to be an essential reference not only during the novitiate but also throughout our lives. It serves as food and as a guide for our Lasallian way of seeking God, the God of Jesus Christ who wants “*all to have life and have it to the full*” (Jn 10:10). Aware that our prayer is “*an interior activity, an application of the soul to God*” (Explanation, 1), we know that this prayer is inseparable from our commitment in time and place to the human person.

3. Our Lasallian method of prayer

One of our greatest spiritual treasures is the Method of Prayer that the Founder left us, not so much for the structure it offers us but for the great ideas that it contains and which can enlighten our spiritual journey on the condition that we make these ideas our own.

Entering into the presence of God

For the Founder, there is no prayer that does not begin with Presence. *“The first thing, therefore, that we must do in interior prayer is to become penetrated interiorly with the presence of God”* (Explanation, 14). I think that this is the first and most important of the Lasallian ideas about prayer, and it is the one that has enriched my own prayer.

If we distance ourselves from our habitual activities and relationships, it is not to close in on ourselves in a type of narcissistic introspection. It is to get to the “center” or the “heart” for our encounter with God and for the encounter with ourselves. Based on sentiments of faith, this “re-centering” will allow us to see better what we do, to purify ambiguous motives, to renew ourselves in a more disinterested and God-like commitment. In a similar vein, Paulo Freire invites us to distance ourselves, from time to time, from pedagogical tasks so as to be able to return to them renewed through an in-depth personal reflection. Should

not this also be a normal part of our ministry?

The first nine acts of the first part of the Method try to prolong the dialogue with God. They attempt to deepen the relationship between an ever-present God, who takes the initiative and reveals himself as both saving and merciful, and the person, who recognizes both his smallness and limitations and his acceptance of being loved and saved in Jesus Christ. It is in this sense that Gabriel Marcel says that “*to pray is to accept being loved.*”

Prayer is a dialogue, and it cannot be any other way. It is a loving dialogue with God in which God takes the initiative. The Founder invites us to fill ourselves with an awareness of the ever-present God. In fact, the more love increases, the more prayer becomes a kind of simple, loving attention to the God who is present. This is the gentle presence of those who love one another and who communicate with one another on an interior level, without the need for words or gestures. Placing oneself in the presence of God is not to recall a theory. Rather, it is to recall God's presence in our own history. It is not about evasion or individual isolation. The living God reaches out to me in my personal history and invites me to collaborate in his “*work.*” This means, above all, an invitation to be a witness and an instrument, a sacrament of his love.

We should, like the Founder, think of God as being

transparent rather than transcendent. God reveals himself in the world through events, in our history, in a brother or a sister, in the poor. An encounter with God in the person of Jesus: “*No one can come to the Father except through me*” (Jn 14:6)] is inseparable from an encounter with Jesus in the person of one's neighbor: “*In so far as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me*” (Mt 25:40)]. God present in creation invites us to continue the work of creation. God present in our innermost being and in our brothers and sisters invites us to believe in human dignity and to create community. God present in the Church invites us to build up the Church. God present in the Eucharist invites us to continue to be Eucharist.

Contemplating the mystery of Jesus

In the second part of the Method, which we might call the body of the prayer, the Founder wants us to contemplate Jesus Christ in the Gospels in order that the example of his life and teaching may help us to be transformed in Him. It is an invitation to contemplate Jesus as our Way, Truth, and Life. Basically, Jesus Christ in his person, thoughts, words, and actions are the only topic of the Brother's prayer. Therefore, the Gospel is our first and primary prayer book. In short, we take the humanity of Jesus seriously, centering ourselves in the events of his life and applying them to our own. This is what the Founder understood by the “*spirit of mystery,*” the contemplation of Jesus Christ,

who by his spirit lives and grows in the relationship of the Brother with his disciples, with his Brothers, and with those with whom he comes into contact. The Word of God, the mystery of Jesus contemplated in prayer, ought to be transformed into life. According to the Sulpician School, Jesus contemplated with the eyes and the heart will only be authentic if the one who contemplates ends up becoming Jesus for others.

We can say, therefore, that the coordinates of Lasallian prayer are both life and the Word of God. This involves reading life from the perspective of the Word. The Rule tells us that we should find the fundamental source of our prayer in Sacred Scripture and that each day we should read and meditate on the Word of God: “*They read and meditate on the Word of God every day*” (Rule, 67). In this vein Karl Barth said that the two principal prayer books for people today should be the Bible and the newspaper. Similarly, it is popularly said in Latin America that we should pray with one ear in the Gospel and the other in the city. Thus, what seems to be so modern to us is already part of our rich Lasallian heritage.

The Word of God must be our “*ration for the day*” (Ex 16:4), which nourishes and allows us to know better God and his Will. It permits us to integrate our own identity in a better way. Prayer inspired by the Word presented to us each day in the liturgy is a unifying element of our spirituality. In the morning, we

allow ourselves to be permeated by the Word as a field is permeated by rain. Like Mary, we relive the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh in us. Then, like Mary in the mystery of the Visitation, we bring the Word to others. The Word upon which we meditated should become the Word that we share.

The Church invites us today to share Scripture readings as a prayer not only with our Brothers but also with other members of the People of God: *“Meditation of the Bible **in common** is of great value. When practiced according to the possibilities and circumstances of life in community, this meditation leads to a joyful sharing of the riches drawn from the Word of God, thanks to which brothers or sisters grow together and help one another to make progress in the spiritual life. Indeed it would be helpful if this practice were also encouraged among other members of the People of God, priests and laity alike. This will lead, in ways proper to each person's particular gifts, to setting up schools of prayer, of spirituality and of prayerful reading of the Scriptures, in which God 'speaks to people as friends' and lives among them, so that he might invite and draw them into fellowship with himself”* (*Vita Consecrata*, 94). This is another concrete way of sharing our charism.

Reality presents itself to us in a twofold way: in nature and in history. The Founder almost never deals with the topic of nature in his writings. But in invit-

ing us to see everything with the eyes of faith, he implicitly invites us to discover God in his creatures. We should be very open to the wonders of God in nature and to the actions of God in history. In the words of Brother Noé Zevallos: *“To look upon everything in the light of faith is to look at the economy, politics, sociology, world problems, what is read in newspapers...everything in the light of faith. To look upon everything is to find in everything the presence of God also through his absence. Therefore, in order to be witnesses of the Lord in this world which he left, which he does not need, we should act in the midst of humankind as if we had seen the Invisible”* (Vayan y Evangelicen, p. 17).

Incarnating in life what was contemplated in prayer

The God discovered in the inner recesses of the heart is the God of salvation history, the God of Jesus Christ. In his presence we have in facing our own existence been challenged by its mystery made manifest in Jesus. We have to return now from prayer to our everyday existence. Lasallian prayer leads to life in a very concrete way: with resolutions that are **“present, particular and effective”** (*Explanation*, 75). It is important to continue one's prayer in the very heart of life and the Founder also gives us very concrete means for this. He proposes recalling the presence of God throughout the day to rekindle the fire that is lit in the

inner recesses of the heart every morning. He proposes the frequent use of ejaculations throughout the day. *“In fact, at certain moments a cry toward God may arise spontaneously on the lips of a person, in the very heart of an event which one is experiencing: a cry of joy, a cry of distress, a cry of confidence, a cry of fidelity. It is from the depths of a loving relationship that this 'arrow' flies toward God”* (CL, p. 433). In this way, the Word of God becomes the principal and inspiring dynamic of our entire existence.

Prayer, therefore, can culminate in an act of offering not only of resolutions but also of one's entire existence. *“I also offer myself to you, my God, along with all my actions and my conduct throughout the day”* (Explanation, 121). This is our liturgy of the heart, our worship pleasing to God, our cosmic Mass, carried out in the story of each day, with the only desire of fulfilling God's will and that of his saving plan. *“Be so kind as to accept, I beg you my God, the desire I have of pleasing you alone, and that of glorifying you perfectly, ceaselessly fulfilling your most holy will”* (Explanation, 121). In this way our prayer is identified with the inner dynamic of the Lord's Prayer, which is the Christian prayer par excellence. *“Father, may your kingdom come.”*

I would not want to end this part of the letter without making a very heartfelt reference to our senior Brothers. Many of us learned to pray thanks to you. For

many Brothers, you continue to be a living testimony of the importance of prayer in everyday life. I believe that today you continue to have a very important role to play thanks to your fidelity and your experience and to the wisdom that comes with years. I invite you to continue helping us to live our encounter with Christ ever more authentically. I invite you to continue to mentor many young people in their search for meaning and for the spiritual dimension of life. I invite you to continue your apostolic lives by being “*teachers of prayer*” and intercessors on behalf of our Institute, of vocations, and of the needs of our world.

I remind you, senior Brothers, also of what the Founder says in the Duties of a Christian. He presents to us the different forms of praying to God from the heart: by silence, by thoughts, by affection, by actions...; and he concludes by telling us: “*but one of the best ways of praying to God from the heart is to pray through suffering, and this is done when you withstand patiently the hardships which God sends, with the intention of honoring him or of extending some benefit, whether spiritual or temporal*” (CL 20, pp. 473-474).

4. Our liturgical life

The Eucharist

Even though the Rule states that the Eucharist should energize every aspect of the Brother's life (Rule, 70), it

seems to me, and I have heard other Brothers comment on this, that very often we have made the celebration of the Eucharist just another exercise of piety. Nonetheless, the Eucharist is a celebration that expresses and nourishes the values of our consecrated life each day (a typical Lasallian term which highlights that which is most important). The Eucharist is an invitation to re-live, in a sacramental way, the bonds of our brotherhood. It is an invitation to listen to the Word of God and to allow ourselves to reflect upon that Word. It is an invitation to be in touch with the sacrifice of Christ and to renew our commitment to service and to the mission that the Lord has entrusted to us.

First of all, the Eucharist **builds up our community**. There is a very close relationship between Eucharist and brotherhood. Saint Paul told the Christians at Corinth: *“Although there are many of us, we are one body for we all share in the one loaf”* (1 Cor 10:17). Of course brotherhood should exist even before the celebration, or at least the beginnings of brotherhood with all its limitations and ambiguities. But, as we celebrate the Eucharist in common, this spirit of goodwill is nourished and encouraged. Living in community is not easy. Religious brotherhood is a journey more than a point of departure. It is something that is **“built”** (Rule, 49). Communities are always imperfect, but they are made up of persons who learn more about how to be Brothers every day as they receive Christ in communion.

In the Eucharist the Word teaches us every day because, as the Founder says, “*we learn to speak to God only by listening to him*” (M 64.2). The Eucharist is the place for listening to a Word that allows us to look at ourselves in the mirror of Christ, that changes those ways of thinking that do not conform to the Gospel, and that invites us to bring into harmony our will with the will of God. “*As the Church's spiritual tradition teaches, meditation on God's word, and on the mysteries of Christ in particular, gives rise to fervor in contemplation and ardor of apostolic activity*” (*Vita Consecrata*, 94).

The sacramental character of the Word in the Eucharist makes God present not only in a personal and close way. God present in the Eucharist invites us to play a role in salvation history. The Word present every day in the Eucharist transforms us in such a way that we assume a role in the great story of salvation. Our small stories are, thus, integrated into the larger story of God's salvation.

The Eucharist is not only an effective sign of Christ's offering of himself on the Cross and of his redeeming death, it is also **a sign and sacrament of our own offering**. “*By means of the Eucharist all consecrated persons are called to live Christ's Paschal Mystery, uniting themselves to him by offering their own lives to the Father through the Holy Spirit*” (*Vita Consecrata*, 95). Our daily life, with its times of happiness and

times of sorrow, becomes a sacrament in the Eucharist. To the extent that we enter into communion with Christ the Servant, we also become servants. In the third Eucharistic Prayer, we ask that what we celebrate might become an “*everlasting gift.*” This is also the Founder's view when he suggests that each Brother, during the Offertory, “*unite with the priest and with Jesus Christ himself, in offering our bodies, our senses, our inclinations, and our passions, as a victim wholly consecrated to God...*” (*Collection*, p. 59).

Finally, we are invited to **continue the Eucharistic mystery** of dedication and self-giving for the life of the world. “*The bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world*” (Jn 6:51). In the Eucharist the Brothers, as the *Declaration* tells us, renew “*their continual readiness to serve the youth to whom they are sent*” (20: 10). We should not forget that Christian faith invites us to leave the temple and to go out to meet the wounded person along the road. The Brother should find God beneath the frailty of the humble Eucharistic signs of bread and wine; but he should also find God in children and in youth, especially the poor.

The Eucharistic should have a basic apostolic aspect for us. “*The community assembled to celebrate the Eucharist regains vigor and strengthens its unity by the gift of the Spirit. It is called to test in daily living and to deepen by practice the strength of recovery, of reconciliation, of mutual support, of placing its ener-*

gies in common in view of the growth of the Kingdom” (CL 50, p. 124).

The final objective of the Eucharist is not Communion but Mission. We could say, as Henri Nouwen invites us to do in several of his writings, that the dynamic that springs forth from the Eucharist goes from communion to community, and from community to ministry. Our experience of communion - like that of the disciples on the road to Emmaus - first invites our Brothers to share with one another our stories and to construct with one another a body of love. Then, as a community, we can go out in all directions and reach out to all kinds of people with our eyes and ears open and with our hearts on fire.

The liturgy of the hours

Another privileged time for liturgical prayer is the celebration of the liturgy of hours, to which we are invited by the Rule. *“The Brothers meet together at least in the morning and in the evening to celebrate the liturgy of the hours in union with the praise and continual intercession of the Church. They may also organize different forms of prayer by which to express the life of their community” (Rule, 71).* This common prayer time should be food for our faith and spirituality and an impetus for our apostolic dedication.

On the one hand, the liturgy of the hours allows us to

experience the presence of the risen Lord with whom we unite ourselves along with the whole Church and through whom we offer our prayer to the Father. On the other hand, within a perspective of wonder and joyous meditation, it teaches us about his works. At the same time, the liturgy of the hours - with its rhythms of light and darkness and of morning and evening - brings together, through the praying of Psalms that give expression to the feelings and the experience of the human adventure, our own personal and community stories with the story of God's saving plan.

Lauds, at the beginning of our day, reminds us that just as night and its darkness come to an end, history continues and life opens for us a new adventure. The praying of Lauds is an invitation to begin again; and, therefore, we direct our first thoughts to God, singing our praise of him with the optimism of the first dawn of creation: “*God saw that it was good*” (Gn 1:18). But we have yet another great reason to begin our day with prayer. At dawn on Easter Sunday, Jesus rose; and, since then, his ever-youthful presence among us - symbolized by the light of morning - is an act of faith that enlightens and gives meaning to our own story, inviting us to live as children of light, and thereby increasing the good that there is in the world.

Vespers, as dusk falls, recalls a series of feelings that we now present to the Lord. Satisfaction for the day that is ending becomes a prayer of thanksgiving and

praise because, as in the case of Mary, the Lord has been there for us and has done great things in and through us. In the same way, we may experience a sense of unease and repentance because we may not have always responded as invited to God's saving plan. It is a time to recognize our inconsistencies and weaknesses. The day that is ending prepares us, also, to view life with the wisdom of one who has been reminded of its brevity and invited to place one's trust in Christ, the never-ending light.

III. A Few Concluding Remarks about Prayer

Personally, I think that one of the richest characteristics of our Lasallian prayer is its apostolic character. Our spirituality is unifying because it is the same Spirit that consecrates us as Brothers and that touches the hearts of the young whom we teach. Therefore, we cannot separate the Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer from the Meditations for the Time of Retreat. The Founder has many texts in his meditations that invite us to live the vital tension between prayer and mission. I would like to highlight only the following one: *“So, when it happens that you encounter some difficulty in the guidance of your disciples, when there are some who do not profit from your instructions and you observe a certain spirit of immorality in them, turn to God with confidence.*

Very insistently ask Jesus Christ to make his Spirit come alive in you, since he has chosen you to do his work” (M 196.1).

We cannot separate these two dimensions of our lives. If we did so we might become a philanthropic society, no doubt doing a lot of good for others, but we would be unable to make the Gospel of Jesus visible. And it is the Gospel that gives meaning to our lives. It is, at times, sad to hear said today that religious have more interest in and spend more time talking about money and aging than they do about prayer. There is nothing more contrary to an authentic apostolic zeal than thinking that we should leave prayer aside in order to have more time for our service to others. It is precisely this desire to serve others that should awaken in us the need for prayer. Furthermore, our prayer should never have an exclusively private purpose since it must always be open to the needs of the world. In this regard, our Founder's words in one of his meditations seem to me to be especially significant: *“You have exercises which are arranged for your own sanctification; but if you have an ardent zeal for the salvation of those whom you are called to instruct, you will not fail to perform them and to relate them to this intention” (M 205.2).*

Finally, I would like to add a word about the personal and community dimensions of prayer. I think that there is a tension here that should be kept in mind, and both forms of prayer should be integrated. We

might be inclined to say that personal prayer is uniquely our own because this kind of prayer comes from within the person; and, yet, we have as persons, also, freely chosen to unite our lives to a community inspired in Lasallian spirituality and values. We should grow in both of these senses. The Rule asks that the community foster space and the necessary conditions for the personal prayer of its members and, at the same time, that the Brothers organize community prayer in the best way possible.

It seems to me that the problem arises when we reduce prayer to just a series of exercises that must be accomplished. Personal prayer, since it is not scheduled and since it only comes from within the heart in a free encounter with God, is easily lost among our various other interests. Community prayer, on the other hand, becomes a burden that must be endured. Nevertheless, in the words of Brother Larry Schatz: *“The form of our prayer is not as important as the fact that we Brothers do gather together to pray. Praying together is an essential support in our lives as Brothers...I eagerly want the time for community prayer, for the great sense of support and peace it gives me in knowing that, together, we are focused on God”* (Brothers, p. 20).

The Rule foresees occasions when we might open our community prayer to other persons. I think that this would make this dimension of our lives more

visible to others, a dimension which at times stays hidden. In addition, it would be an occasion for sharing our spirituality and enriching ourselves with the spirituality of others. During a visit I made to Lyon before the 1993 General Chapter, I was very impressed by a notice on the doors of the Brothers' chapel. The chapel opened out onto the students' courtyard in Montée des Carmes; and the sign read: "*We Brothers gather for prayer at such-and-such a time. If you would be interested in joining us we would be happy to welcome you.*"

The Founder invites us to conclude our prayer each day by turning to Mary, placing everything we have "*done, thought about, and resolved*" (*Explanation*, 122) under her protection. In a word, this involves looking at Mary so as to continue with her the Lord's saving work. In one of his finest Marian meditations, the Founder asks us to allow ourselves to be penetrated, like Mary, by the Word of God, in order that we might communicate it to others. In this way, "*we may become through her intercession tabernacles of the divine Word*" (M 191.3).

If the Eucharist, as we have seen, is not merely an exercise of piety but a life experience, our relationship with Mary should not be merely a devotional activity but a concrete way of living the Gospel. Like Mary, we live the Gospel through a feminine sense of welcoming, deep love, dedication, disinterest, and

gratuity. As Paul VI wrote: *“First and foremost, the Virgin Mary has always been put forward by the Church for the imitation of the faithful not for the type of life she lived nor even for the socio-cultural society in which she grew up, which has been improved upon almost everywhere, but because in her particular life situation, she totally and responsibly adhered to God's will; because she welcomed the word and put it into practice; because her actions were animated by charity and the spirit of service; because, that is to say, she was the first and most perfect of Christ's disciples: it is this which has universal and ongoing value”* (To Honor Mary, 35).

Fraternally in De La Salle,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Bro. Álvaro Rodríguez E".

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General

